

A MILITARY FORECAST

The German Campaign Against France

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A Military Forecast

The German Campaign Against France

This remarkable outline of the plan of campaign to be followed by Germany in case of war with France was published in the Fortnightly Review of September, 1911, and has been so faithfully followed in the present war that it constitutes a most interesting military study. The author's predictions seem to have been almost prophetic in their accuracy.—EDITOR INFANTRY JOURNAL.

THE German move in Morocco has at least compelled the public to recognize the possibility of war at an early date between France and Germany. French opinion has shown immense restraint in face of the Agadir provocation, but there is a limit to the forbearance the French people will display under German bullying, and the Berlin Government, knowing this as well as we do, is satisfied that, if and when war suits their plans, they can have it by one further turn of the screw, making the position intolerable for a great and high-spirited nation.

A Franco-German war, becoming twenty-four hours after its opening a general European war, must then be recognized as a possibility of the near future. The purpose of this article is not to deal with any of the side issues or incidental contingencies, but to give a succinct account of the official German plan of campaign against France, and by so doing to contribute perhaps towards its being baffled.

The main German idea upon which the plan has been formed is that France must be seriously damaged in the first three weeks of the war, so that Germany may find herself in the position of victor in the first round before England and Russia have entered the field. It is considered that the effect of serious French defeats would be to deter England from landing troops on the Continent, and to induce Russia to conceive that she was doing all she need for her damaged ally by waging a defensive war on the Vistula. The German *mot d'ordre* on the commencement of hostilities, which are to precede the formal declaration of war, will be at all cost to get well established on French soil, and concentrate as large an army as possible behind, that is to say west of, the line of the Vosges, so as to fight a decisive battle somewhere in the neighborhood of Rheims or Chalons.

There was a time when it was thought that the chances of a direct attack on the line of the Vosges were not inconsiderable, and that weak points might be found between Belfort and Verdun. But this view is now held in only a modified degree, for it is considered that the best chance of making the frontal attack a success will be by executing a disconcerting and menacing offensive movement through the comparatively open country between Verdun and Sedan. All the French plans being based on the concentration of the national forces at Neufchateau, behind Toul, one of the objects of the German strategists has been to seek a line of attack which would evade that base of concentration, render it inapplicable to the situation created by their strategy and embarrass the French to devise another in time.

With this end in view the Germans have for the last fifteen years been making the necessary preparations to secure that broadened front for their advance which is essential for the accomplishment of their purpose, and these preparations are now practically completed. The line of the Vosges is not merely exceedingly formidable as a fortified position, but it is also exceedingly narrow. From Belfort to Verdun, the two extremities, is no more than 145 miles, and although Belfort might be turned by the violation of Swiss territory, the invading army could only operate against Lyons, which would take time, and exercise little or no influence on the first phase of the war. It is not safe to assume anything too positively in a problem which must become modified by fresh factors from time to time, but unless Austria can be induced to carry out an offensive movement through Porrentruy and the Rhone Valley, Germany will stand on the defensive in South Alsace. The recent fortification of several places near Mulhouse points to this conclusion. Austria's ability to send troops into France will entirely depend on Italy's action, and on what happens in Galicia. Yet the suspicion cannot be suppressed that Austria would be very willing to do something else than the supplemental raid into France to prove her loyalty to her Prussian partner.

In any case, there is no necessity for any overwhelming anxiety on the part of the French authorities with regard to what may happen south of Belfort. Here, if anywhere, the opening for an offensive movement seems more favorable to France than to Germany. For our present purpose, which is limited to the consideration

of what is aimed at in the first two or three weeks of the war, the southern scene of conflict need not again be referred to.

The contracted front of the Vosges is almost as serious a disadvantage to the army acting on the offensive as the formidable character of its defences. The lines of possible advance for any considerable body of troops are also further diminished by considerable stretches of impossible country. For instance, any advance between Belfort and Epinal, speaking, as we are, only of large operations, would be out of the question. There are, indeed, only four lines of advance open to the Germans in this quarter. They are from Metz to Verdun (two roads, one via Conflans, and the other via Mars la Tour), through Pont a Mousson to Commercy, through Chateau Salins to Nancy and Toul, and from Strasburg to Luneville. The two last named are available for a combined attack on Toul and its system of dependent forts. The total frontage for the German advance between Verdun and Luneville is then no more than seventy miles. In this restricted space it would be impossible for the Germans to employ more than half a million men, and in the event of any reverse or break-down in the execution of the plan of attack the Germans would find themselves exposed to heavy loss before they could get outside the range of the French fortress artillery.

Although the German authorities are set on putting the efficiency of the Vosges forts to the test, and also of experimenting with some of their new theories for the capture of fortified places, it is to the widened front that they are mainly looking as the scene of their first victories. From Luneville to Verdun they have seventy miles of fortress, fort, and battery in front of them. From Verdun to Givet there are seventy-five miles of undefended country. Longwy and Montmedy do not count as fortresses. Give-Charlemont and Mezieres, both on the Meuse, are more up to date, but from Verdun to Mezieres stretches open country with a frontage of fifty miles. This is Germany's objective.

When the French drew the line of the Vosges fortification at Verdun it was assumed that the undefended gap south of the frontiers of Belgium and the Grand Duchy was too narrow to admit of any considerable German advance from Thionville, and that if it were undertaken a favorable opportunity would offer for their assuming the offensive under promising conditions. It is not quite evident why the French authorities did so, but they

seem to have assumed that Germany would respect Belgian neutrality. The German text-books of twenty years ago encouraged this view by representing that Germany gained by Belgian neutrality. These passages have long been eliminated. They were made ridiculous by the elaborate preparations for taking the offensive through neutral territory from Dalheim to Treves.

Even if we leave out of account the strip flanked by Dutch territory, Germany acquired a new frontage for the outpouring of the enormous forces that will be employed in the next war of 100 miles from Thionville to Aix la Chapelle. By a converging movement, leaving the Meuse on the right hand, that would gain seventy miles of practically undefended country on the northeast frontier of France. The roads intervening between German and French territory are excellent. There are several useful lines of railway joining the main Brussels-Metz line at Marloie, Libramont, Arlon, and Luxemburg. Even if we exclude Namur, the Germans gain six direct roads to the French frontier. They have the Ourthe valley route to Marche-Rochefort and to Marche-Ciney, both good for Dinant, Beauraing and Givet; the Viel Salm, La Roche and St. Hubert for Bouillon and Sedan; the Stavelot, Bastogne, and Libramont road for Bouillon and Carignan; the St. Vith-Gouvy for the same destination; the Diekirch-Arlon Virton for Montemedy; and the Treves-Luxemburg road for Longwy. By the longest of the roads German territory is only seventy miles from French; by the shortest, Treves to Longwy, it is only thirty miles.

Having conceived the plan, the German authorities did not tarry in making the preparations behind their own frontier to render it capable of execution. For the last seven years Germany has been entirely engaged in providing frontier railways flanking the projected front, and in linking them up with the two bases on the middle Rhine at Coblenz and Cologne. In addition to the railways, double lined and metalled for heavy traffic, sidings have been provided at all the stations, and at suitable points between them. Between Montjoie and St. Vith landing spaces sufficient for over 120,000 men have been provided, and it is confidently asserted that that force could be thrown across the Belgian frontier between Francorchamps and Gouvy in a single night without the Belgians knowing what was coming, the troops to be employed being entrained at Coblenz, Cologne, Bonn, and

Gladbach. There is not the smallest reason for hoping that this dispatch of the advance force of the invaders would miscarry. If the whole *corps d'armee* were not over the border in the twenty-four hours, at least a sufficient part would be over to make sure of the possession of Libramont in half that time. It is declared that the four cavalry regiments and four horse artillery batteries at Elsenborn camp during six months of the year could be at Libramont within six hours of leaving their base.

Under the present system, perhaps under any, there is no possibility of the Belgians doing anything to arrest or even delay this movement. General Hellebaut, the Belgian Minister of War, made what is called a reassuring statement in the Brussels Chamber a little time ago. He referred to the official arrangements made for blowing up bridges on the railways, and otherwise rendering them useless. His second statement was even more optimistic. He alleged that the Stavelot-Malmedy road was commanded by the fire of some of the Liege forts, and could therefore be made impassable for the Germans. I shall deal with the latter statement in some detail further on. But with regard to the destruction of the railways in Belgium, it must first of all be stated that for the initial rush Germany would not use them. With Stavelot and Trois Ponts in the hands of the German cavalry, can the Belgian military authorities feel confident that the bridge over the Ambleve would be destroyed? But even if it were destroyed it would not delay the German advance, which so far as Belgian soil is concerned, is to be made by the roads and not by rail. Belgian railways would only come into use for the purposes of supply and reinforcements. Even if the Belgian arrangements for placing the lines out of use worked to perfection, the German advance would not be retarded, and the German railway corps could repair the damage done to the line in a comparatively short space of time. To talk of delaying the German advance by blowing up a few bridges between Stavelot and Gouvy may be compared to trying to stop a cannon-ball with an open umbrella.

But the new suggestion that the Liege forts, or rather two of them, command the Malmedy-Stavelot road raises a point of interest, and incidentally General Hellebaut has contributed a new fact to the elements of this important question.

When the forts constructed under General Brialmont's direction at Liege and Namur were armed in 1896, the maximum

range of the guns placed in them was twelve miles. Stavelot is eighteen and one-half miles distant as the crow flies from Embourg or Chaudfontaine, the two nearest forts of the Liege position. As General Hellebaut's statement is made with full knowledge of the facts, we can only conclude that new ordnance possessing the maximum yet attained range of twenty-one miles has been placed in those forts in lieu of the old. But if the Belgian fire from them closes the direct road from Malmedy, it cannot reach the road to Viel Salm from Montenau and Ligneuville or that from St. Vith to Gouvy. The closing of one road does not close the door in the face of the Germans, for they command other entrances.

But General Hellebaut's admission as to the improved armament of Liege does supply a reason for the taking in hand of the latest of Germany's strategic railways on the Belgian frontier. A miserable little line, nine miles in all, has hitherto served all the requirements of Eupen. This loop line commences at Herbesthal on the main line from Liege to Aix la Chapelle, etc., passes through Eupen and then links on with the Aix-St. Vith line at Raeren. It is now in course of being converted into a double-railed line capable of supporting heavy traffic. In a vague sort of way it was felt that there must be some project behind this, but beyond the general principle of broadening the front as much as possible no definite importance was attached to it. It seems now pretty clear that the design is to seize the Baraque de Michel, the highest plateau in Belgium, from which German siege batteries could enter into a duel on the most favorable terms with Chaudfontaine and Embourg. In this way at least the Belgian artillerists in those forts would have other work to do than cannonading the Stavelot route at a range of eighteen to nineteen miles.

The practical point, which is for the moment all that need be considered, is that the Belgian measures described by the War Minister of that country would not deter or delay the German advance on Libramont, which may be regarded as their first strategical objective.

In violating Belgian neutrality Germany would endeavour to convince the Belgian Government and people that she was not animated by any hostile spirit towards them, and there have been some indications that she flattered herself that her persuasive utterances would be accepted. General Hellebaut's statement

must then have administered a considerable shock to the German strategists, who have regarded Belgium as a *quantité négligeable*. The fortified position of Liege, well held, with its line of communication open to Namur and Antwerp, is a very awkward fact for the invader sweeping across the Ardennes for France. It would not perhaps count for a great deal if all went well at the front, but a retreating German army would be a very favorable mark for the resentment aroused in Belgium by the unprovoked invasion of that country.

Decidedly the existence of Liege is a material fact in regard to the advance across the Ardennes, which the German strategists must include in their calculations. They will not, even for that consideration, defer the dash on Libramont, but it will be coupled with a polite but firm request to the Belgians delivered by another army corps from that hastening to the Semois to allow the Germans to take care of the Liege forts for them. What will be the Belgian reply to that? What are the effective arrangements in the forts themselves to support the reply with deeds? It will not be such a simple task as blowing up the bridges at Trois Ponts. At least we must assume that the guns at Chaudfontaine and Embourg will have other work to do for a long time than to enfilade the road from Malmedy to Stavelot.

The Germans are prepared to supplement the advance through the Belgian Ardennes with a movement encompassing the six forts of Liege on the right bank of the Meuse. Some of those forts are very strong, others are not so strong, but what is not certain is whether the position would become untenable if Boncelles or Evegnée were captured or demolished. It has also to be remembered that if the German siege batteries could hold their ground round the Baraque de Michel and Gileppe, their fire would reach the city of Liege itself. If, however, the Belgians display the moral fortitude to hold out at Liege despite the imposing demonstration that the Germans intend making against it, they ought to be able to maintain their ground until aid reached them from both France and England. Even if they could not accomplish so much, the arrest of the Germans at Liege for a few weeks would secure the time needed to organize a formidable interior place of stand reposing on the fortified position of Namur. On the other hand, if by lack of patriotic devotion or through moral degeneracy Liege succumbs to the Germans at their first

summons, Namur, which is a far weaker position than Liege, could not be converted in time into an adequate base for national defence. Besides, the loss of Liege would compromise the whole Belgian position outside Antwerp, which is a place entirely for defensive and not offensive action.

The completeness of the success of Germany's attack on the northeast frontier of France would depend therefore on the fate of Liege. If it passed into her hands in the first few days of the war German strategists would have no anxiety about their right flank, and would press on the broad front from Givet to Thionville. We have dwelt more especially on the role of the troops marching across the Belgian Ardennes, one entire army corps in the first place to be increased to two as soon as the fate of Liege was decided. This would be the right wing of the army of invasion. But the left wing, moving through Treves, Thionville, and Luxemburg, would be even more formidable. Its objective would be Stenay and Vouziers. The taking up of a strong position on the Aisne by the two armies moving through Belgium and the Grand Duchy would represent the successful achievement of the first stage in the German plan of campaign against France.

It is not easy to see how a German success up to that point can be prevented, and it is to be hoped that France in a vain attempt to hinder what is practically inevitable may not squander her magnificent cavalry, which, if preserved intact, might in the second phase of the struggle turn the scale in her favor. To obtain her primary objectives, Germany is prepared to waste a large number of men. The cost of men will not prevent her straining every effort to attain her ends. If the French pour over into Belgium to meet her half-way, they will be playing her game and equalizing the chances of loss. An obstinate defence without risking too much in any pitched action north of the Rheims-Laon-La Fere line is clearly the best French strategy. Time would thus be gained for England to play her part, and the farther German troops have got south of the Semois the better our chance of striking at their rear. It will be not a bad thing for France's chances of final victory if the first great battle of the war can be deferred until the Germans are in the Aisne Valley. It will take the Germans much longer to get there than the three weeks we shall require to come into action, and it is not difficult to conceive a situation in which the Germans might find themselves very uncomfortable.

On the other hand, there is a risk that the French generals will not relish the idea of giving ground, and that they will strain every effort to meet the Germans before they have got off Belgian territory. This will be to fight the German's battle, and to risk giving the color to the whole war by an initial blunder due to military pride. They should make allowance for the conditions under which their allies can alone come to their help. Both England and Russia must be slow from different circumstances. Therefore France must be patient and give ground. Catinat is the general they should take as their model, and *reculer pour mieux sauter* should be their motto. The only way to baffle the German plan of campaign is to leave the development of its inherent difficulties to time and distance. The Germans will be far less formidable at Rethel or Vouziers, if no battles have been lost by the French before they arrive there, than they would be at, let us say, Libramont or even Sedan. It will no doubt be disagreeable to French sentiment to see the first battles of the war occur on French soil, but victories there would be better than defeats further north.

No one can predict with absolute confidence the line that the Belgian Government will take on the outbreak of hostilities. The defence or non-defence of Liege is only part of the question. If it is defended, that signifies that Belgium will take her place side by side with England and France. If it is not defended it will still leave her real policy open to doubt, for the Germans, on getting possession of Liege or even of some of the eastern and southern forts, would leave her studiously alone and refrain from doing anything to irritate Belgian opinion. The test of the intentions of the Belgian Government would be the degree of promptitude with which it summoned England to perform her treaty obligations in defending Belgium. But that step would be just as much an act of hostility to Germany as the defence of Liege would be, and therefore the inference seems clear that if Liege is not defended the Belgian Government would not be very energetic in calling upon England for aid. The German authorities seem strangely confident that in the first stage of the war they will not have much trouble from the Belgians, and that if they only succeed in the campaign they will have none at all.

I have carefully refrained from saying anything on the subject of what this country could and would do when the Germans

violate Belgian territory. It is a case in which it is better not to give the smallest indication of what one conceives to be possible; but at least it may be said that there is no reason for thinking that we should not be able to perform a useful part in conjunction with our allies. There is another point, however, on which it is permissible to express a decided opinion. Whatever the opinion of the existing Government in Belgium may be about the two neighbors, the opinion of the great mass of the Belgian people, Fleming as well as Walloon, is entirely in sympathy with France. There is a German tendency in the commercial circles of Antwerp, which is already half a German city, and there is a sort of feeling in bureaucratic circles that Germany would prove a good and possibly an inevitable protector; but the mass of the nation dislikes the Germans, as they will discover when they come into the thickly peopled parts of the country. Of course, this sentiment will not count for much in the Ardennes, which is thinly populated, and where the German legions will far outnumber the inhabitants. But it is a force that will have to be reckoned with sooner or later by the Belgian Government as well as the Germans.

With regard to the German plan of campaign as a whole, there is nothing to be done except to be prepared in good time with measures suitable, not to foil it in the first stage, for that is impossible and will only invite disaster, but to baffle it in the second stage, when English cooperation has become possible. Belgian complaisance to Germany, even if it is displayed, will not for a very long time go so far as admitting her troops into Antwerp, and so long as that gate remains open there is no elimination of the factor of English participation in the defence of Belgium from the calculations of German strategists. They are counting on prompt successes, to be gained partly by the suddenness of their attack and partly by the other side playing their game, to prevent the weak points of their plan from being discovered, and to remove the risks that attach to it in common with all other operations of war.